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John Leighton Wilson

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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS
POST OFFICE BOX NUMBER 158
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

EDUCATIONAL DEPARTMENT

John Leighton Wilson

One of Union's Great Missionaries

Warren C. Taylor.

Through mission study and the great war the attention of the church has been directed this year to Africa. Study of this continent could not be made without reference to the great achievements of the early pioneers. Among these there are few who can compare with John Leighton Wilson, a graduate of Union College in the class of 1829.

Wilson was born March 25, 1809, of godly parents, in the town of Salem, South Carolina. His childhood was spent in a cultured, Christian home. His early life on the farm gave him a strong physique and an intense love for nature which in later years served him well in Africa.

His early education was in the log school-house. This was followed by study in the High School at Winnsboro, South Carolina. But when it came to the selection of a college his pious father was unwilling to send him to the South Carolina College. For while this was a school with a high standard of scholarship, at this time it had for its president a man who was an avowed atheist. Fearing that his boy might be shaken in his faith, his father sent him to Union College, where he could be under the influence of Dr. Nott. This was an expensive decision in those days, involving a long journey for the lad.

Wilson entered the Junior class at Union in the fall of 1827 and graduated in June, 1829. Some of his first letters written home tell of his homesickness, but soon he made friends, some of whom remained true to the end of his life. Notable among these was

Dr. J. B. Adger, who became a successful missionary to the Armenians in Turkey.

He gained a fondness for walking, and his letters describe some of the tramps taken into the country around Schenectady. In particular, he describes the march to the Catskills of a company of student cadets, "with knapsacks on our backs and muskets on our shoulders." Years afterward in Africa, he refers to the wonderful view which impressed him from the "highest peak of the mountains."

Following his graduation at Union, Wilson taught school. During this first year, he became deeply impressed religiously and gave up teaching to enter the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina. While here he became strongly interested in the foreign missionary enterprise and on Christmas, 1832, he offered himself as a missionary, with the desire to be sent to Africa. This desire had had its first conception in the stories of that land to which, as a lad, he had listened in the negro cabins at home.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions accepted his offer and sent him first on an exploring expedition to the West Coast of Africa. The object of the journey was to reach Liberia and then explore up and down the coasts and inland in order to determine conditions in Africa and to select a suitable location for starting missionary work. He remained in Africa for five months, making a thorough investigation of conditions. Then he returned home to present the board a full and valuable report. After a few months he sailed back to Africa, accompanied by his bride. For seven years they labored at Cape Palmas, building up a Christian community and making extended journeys into the continent, mostly on foot.

His life was full of dangerous adventure. In the early part of 1836 the bravery of Wil-

son and his wife was the means of quelling a bitter anti-foreign riot which had been aroused among the natives toward the foreigners who came to settle there. In more than one of his journeys he came in contact with cannibals. In one instance, when he was upon an exploring tour with only a few attendants, he became too sick to continue his journey, so he lay down under a tree. One of his attendants warned him that the villagers had decided to eat him at night. In fact they had agreed that it would be unnecessary to use any salt because of his whiteness. Far from any human help, he felt he was in the Master's service and, seeking His strength, he gave orders to go on.

After seven years at Cape Palmas, Wilson started a new station on the Gaboon River. This began a new and prosperous period in his missionary work.

Along with his success as a missionary he was also a noted scientist. A half century before Livingstone and Stanley, Wilson was an authority on Africa, and his name was well known in scientific circles in Europe and America. He had acquaintance with all kinds of African wild beasts and reptiles. His crowning contribution was the discovery of the gorilla. In 1846 he discovered the skull of this new ape, to which he gave the name "gorilla." This aroused such great interest that exploration parties were organized to search for a living specimen. Paul Du Chaillu, the great African naturalist, who was a pupil of Mr. Wilson, was the first to find one. Later Wilson presented the Natural History Society of Boston with a full-size skeleton.

Another discovery made by Wilson was that of African rubber. It was due to his efforts that the attention of the commercial world was turned to the extensive rubber fields of this great continent.

As a linguist, Wilson reduced two African languages to writing, the Grebo and Mpongwe. This was a difficult feat, as there was no written language or alphabet of any kind. He prepared grammars and dictionaries and taught the natives to read. In 1840 his mission press was printing 16 separate publications. The total number of volumes at that time was 25,000.

Doubtless the most valuable book of which Wilson was the author was "Western Africa." David Livingstone declared it to be "the best book ever written on that part of Africa." The book was encyclopaedic in character and most of its descriptions were from the personal observations and investigations of the author during his nineteen years of actual contact with the African wilds.

No sketch of Wilson would be complete without mention of his valuable assistance in the suppression of the horrible slave trade. He saw it at its worst. Through a document which he prepared, 10,000 of which were distributed in England, the British Government was persuaded to retain its squadron along the west coast of Africa. This had a serious effect upon the traffic and led eventually to the suppression of the horrible traffic in slaves.

After nineteen years of hard but successful service in Africa, his health began to fail, and in 1852 Wilson was obliged to return to America. He then became Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, with headquarters at New York. He rendered most valuable services in this capacity. Because of his efforts the first missionary work of the Presbyterian church in Brazil was started.

When the ports of Japan were forced open by Commodore Perry, it was through the wise suggestion of Dr. Wilson that Dr. Hepburn, who was then his family physician,

was sent to that country. Dr. Hepburn became one of the leading figures in the development of Christianity and education in Japan.

At the breaking out of the Civil War, Dr. Wilson gave up his position, in which he had endeared himself to everyone, and with deep sorrow went South to his old home. During the war the responsibility of supplying the chaplains for the army lay upon him, and at its close he was a great power in the reconstruction of the Southern Presbyterian church. With the depleted condition of the South the task of holding the church together was an extremely difficult one. No man exerted a greater influence at this time than he. He became their secretary of Domestic Missions. But his heart was in the Foreign Missionary enterprise. The church had not gotten thoroughly on its feet before he urged the establishment of a foreign missionary board. Quite naturally the General Assembly turned to him, with his unusual experience and ability, to become the first secretary of this board. His biographer claims that this service was the most important in his life.

In 1877 failing health caused him to resign. He was then made secretary emeritus, which position he held until his death on July 13, 1886, one year after the death of his wife. For 77 years this sainted man had poured out his life on the altar of God in most sacrificial service to His cause. "Who follows in his train?"

Schenectady, N. Y.

NOTE: The foregoing is reprinted, by permission of the author, from the June, 1918, issue of "Union Alumni Monthly," published by the Graduate Council of Union College, Schenectady, New York.—J. I. A.